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Constructing a Story to Live By: Ethics, Emotions and Academic Practice in the Context of Climate Change

Abstract: Starting from the concept of the narrative-self, this paper explores the everyday ethics of research and academic practice as seen through the storied-experiences of two women who have chosen their careers through their desire to contribute meaningfully to the resolution of environmental issues. Selves are embedded in language, in relationships, in societies, in places and in ecologies. However, selves are also co-constructed in dialogue between teller and listener or writer and reader. In the intersubjective space opened up through dialogue lies the potential for change at both personal and societal levels. Enacting a narrative ethics of reading and writing that draws on counselling practices, this paper brings my own affective, embodied story into dialogue with the published memoir of Alison Watt. As we both struggle to find stories we can live by within the contexts of specific academic and research communities we begin to challenge the narratives and discourses that dominate our respective fields of field biology and human geography. The emotional and embodied practice of narrative ethics is offered as one possible response to the overemphasis on technical rationality within our society and its institutions. I argue that the development of practical wisdom (phronesis) is essential to addressing issues such as climate change, which are not simply technical problems but are fundamentally rooted in the human condition.

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Abstract: Starting from the concept of the narrative-self, this paper explores the everyday ethics of research and academic practice as seen through the storied-experiences of two women who have chosen their careers through their desire to contribute meaningfully to the resolution of environmental issues. Selves are embedded in language, in relationships, in societies, in places and in ecologies. However, selves are also co-constructed in dialogue between teller and listener or writer and reader. In the intersubjective space opened up through dialogue lies the potential for change at both personal and societal levels. Enacting a narrative ethics of reading and writing that draws on counselling practices, this paper brings my own affective, embodied story into dialogue with the published memoir of Alison Watt. As we both struggle to find stories we can live by within the contexts of specific academic and research communities we begin to challenge the narratives and discourses that dominate our respective fields of field biology and human geography. The emotional and embodied practice of narrative ethics is offered as one possible response to the overemphasis on technical rationality within our society and its institutions. I argue that the development of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is essential to addressing issues such as climate change, which are not simply technical problems but are fundamentally rooted in the human condition.

Keywords: Narrative-Self, Ethics, Environment, Academic Practice, Care

1.1 Researching on an Isolated Island

Alison Watt (2002) worked as an assistant field biologist on Triangle Island--a remote island off the coast of British Columbia--over two summers separated by sixteen years. She arrived for her first four-month stint of fieldwork, a bright-eyed undergraduate student with romantic notions of what it would be like to be a field biologist and a heroic story of how science would make the world a better place. That summer was going to be her apprenticeship, her opportunity to gain first hand experience in doing the meaningful work she wanted to build her career around. Alison cared about birds and was concerned for the future of marine species in the face of human induced pressures such as fishing and pollution. She believed that the work she would be doing, assisting graduate researcher Anne Vallée, would make a difference to the future of these birds. Accepting the job was her temporary answer to the question: what ought I to do to help the birds that I care about?

Sixteen years later, Alison returned to what was now the "Anne Vallée Ecological Reserve" in a less optimistic mood. In the intervening years, Anne Vallée had died on the island, puffin numbers were at a record low, pollution was washing onto what had previously appeared to be pristine beaches, and the effects of climate change were beginning to take their toll. Meanwhile, Alison was still searching for a way to live her life that would meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of seabirds.

Alison's story of working on Triangle Island is told in her ecological memoir¹ "The Last Island: A Naturalist's Sojourn on Triangle Island" (2002). In many ways, hers is a story of a career path never fully embraced, of a friendship that did not take root, of the failure of scientific research to protect the subjects of its research, and ultimately of the cost in human life of isolated research practices. However, it is also a story of caring about non-human organisms, conceiving of them as having their own intrinsic value, and of seeking a way to perform that care and to make a difference to their lives and future prospects. It is a story of and about the practical ethics of research.

This paper builds on the proposition that our selves should be understood as provisional, never-finalizable, narrative answers to the question, How ought I to live? (Frank 2002, 2004, Nelson 2002, Zoloth and Charon 2002). The Last Island presents Alison's temporary answer to this question. I first read it when I was struggling to give meaning to my own experiences as a junior researcher. Thinking with Alison's story helped me to answer this question in ways I would never have come to without that dialogue.

In what follows, I briefly outline the literature linking narrative thinking, everyday ethics and narrative-selves. Then, rather than continue to talk *about* what a narrative environmental ethics might consist of, the remainder of this article enacts such an ethics by bringing my self-story into dialogue with Alison's. Just as Alison's story, though it draws on journal entries she made at the time, was shaped and edited into a book at a point some twenty years after it began, the story I tell here about my experience

¹ Schauffler (2003) defines ecological writers as those writers "who describe the dynamic interplay between inner and outer ecology ...[suggesting] an integration of human and natural realms that helps dissolve the traditional divide between them" (11).

as a PhD student is the story I tell now, some ten years after it began, and should not be mistaken for the story I may have told at the time. It is the present stories of our past experiences, mine and Alison's, that are brought into dialogue here rather than those experiences themselves. Through thinking with my own and Alison's affective, embodied narratives of participating in research practices and communities, I aim to challenge the dominance that discourses of technical rationality have over these communities and to open up new possibilities for being and acting as academics and researchers.

2.1 Narrative-Selves Engaged in Ethics as Housework

The term "story to live by" is taken from Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) work on the establishment and maintenance of professional identities.² While anyone at any career stage can be engaged in actively constructing a story to live by, this task is central to those starting out. I argue that this task is a fundamentally ethical one, with implications that go well beyond the individual. In taking this approach, I draw on a concept of ethics as something everyday and as intimately tied to who a person is (Nelson, 2001). Rather than focusing on the resolution of ethical dilemmas or the judgement of actions that have already been taken, I instead want to emphasise those day-to-day decisions that people take, which Brody (2002) likens to housework, and which ultimately constitute who we are.

One of the forefathers of the tradition of everyday ethics is Aristotle who assigned a central role to practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in ethical matters (Dunne 1993). Quoting

² Their work focuses on teachers, many of whom struggle to find meaning in a profession more and more dominated by technical rationality, see in particular Whelan (1999).

Aristotle, Flyvbjerg (2001) defines *phronesis* as "a true state, reasoned and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man" (56). Contemporary scholars revisiting Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* often do so in an effort to counterbalance the modernist project's overemphasis on what is variously labeled technical rationality (Dunne 1993) or instrumental rationality (Flyvbjerg 2001). In contrast to technical rationality, *phronesis* incorporates the whole of embodied, affective human experience and is concerned with interactions between people and therefore with decisions made in contingent situations whose outcomes cannot be predicted (Dunne 1993). Flyvbjerg (2001) suggests that a *phronetic* social science would seek to understand a particular phenomenon through finding out and telling *narratives* (Flyvbjerg 2001, 137).

Plumwood (2002), in her book on the "ecological crisis of reason", labels the Western doctrine of placing a limited form of monological reason at "the apex of human life" (18) as "rationalism" and links it explicitly to the ecological crises we are currently facing. In Plumwood's view, rationalism is related to dominant narratives in society about mastery over the natural world and over those aspects of human life conceived as "other" to reason (1993). One of the predominant rationalist myths of our time is that "of an invincible and heroic male-coded techno-reason that will solve our current problems and wrest a shining future from the jaws of crisis" (Plumwood 2002, 19). Plumwood is critical of this myth and sees the task of developing narrative and dialogical ethics as essential to counter the dangers rationalism poses to all of life on Earth.

Other scholars critical of defining reason as technical rationality have highlighted the importance of narrative ways of knowing, particularly in relation to ethics (Brody 2002, Bruner 1990, Cameron 2003, Hickory 2003, Liszka 2003, Nelson 2001, Plumwood

2002, White 2000). Bruner (1996), for example, proposes that humans possess a range of ways of knowing, including but not limited to logical-scientific knowing and narrative knowing. He cites research in psychology that indicates the necessity of narrative knowing to social interaction and ethical decision-making.

Intertwined with the growth of narrative approaches to psychology has been the development of the field of narrative ethics (Nelson 1997 and 2001, Brody 1999, Charon and Montello 2002). The field of narrative ethics posits that the self emerges through narrative knowing (Bruner 1990) and is called into being through asking the question at the heart of ethics (Lynn 1998): How ought I to live?

It is here, at the scale of a narrative-self called into being through everyday ethics, that the potential for social change opens up. In conceiving of the self as constructed through narrative, these writers articulate a concept of selves as fundamentally embedded in relationship, society (Somers 1994), and language (Bruner 1990). In order for selves to be intelligible, to make sense in their social context, their tellings and re-tellings are constrained by the discourses available in that particular context (Bruner 1990, Nelson 2002). In this way, the self is caught up in tradition and is susceptible to being disciplined. However, narrative-selves must be understood as dialogical; they are co-constructed between a teller and a listener (or a writer and a reader) even if the audience is only imagined (Frank 1995). In the intersubjective space constituted in the telling of the narrative-self, discourses are interpreted and become vulnerable to being challenged and even changed (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). Viewed from this angle, practical wisdom is as much about who a person is as it is about what he or she does. For this

reason, the study and development of *phronesis* may benefit from a narrative, autobiographical approach.³

Selves must be understood as fundamentally embedded not just in language and social relations but also in ecology and in place (Cameron 2003). The flexibility of narrative, its attention to context and its nuanced aspects render narrative approaches to ethics ideal in addressing the specificities of decisions made in relation to ecosystems and their processes (Cheney 1999). Narrative also helps to link the personal with the ecological. Drawing on literary theory, in his reading of Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac, Liszka (2003) proposes that an everyday environmental ethics can emerge from a person's attempt to narrate their "experience with nature" (44). King (1996) argues that personal narratives may be essential not only to expressing but to actually producing ethical relationships between humans and the rest of the more-than-human world. Treanor (2009) proposes that narratives can both inspire us to strive to develop environmental values and help us to do so. Contemporary narrative approaches to ethics, place and ecology contain threads spun from centuries of indigenous ways of knowing (Basso 1992, Cheney 1999). From such a perspective, place itself is conceived of as having the narrative capacity to story ethics (Basso, 1992) and human lives are understood as existing within stories of geology and biology that extend beyond the span of our species' time on Earth (Rolston III 1998).

Each of us is inextricably embedded in relationships and in these wider stories of ecology and society. Yet, even with the constraints and disciplining this entails, invoking

³ In taking an autobiographical approach and in paying attention to the ways in which personal experience and interpersonal relationships, if allowed to, impact upon academic practice, this paper is indebted to Bondi (1999). For an eco-feminist use of autobiography in environmental ethics see Warren (1990).

the notion of practical wisdom implies that people can improve in their ethical decision-making. Aristotle believed that *phronesis* can be developed through experience, practice and reflection under the guidance of someone already skilled in everyday ethics (Dunne 1993). As critics have pointed out, Aristotle was writing in a relatively homogeneous society where a good deal of agreement could be assumed over what a good life would consist of (Treanor 2009). In the pluralistic societies we currently inhabit, it would be difficult to agree definitively on experts in practical wisdom (Treanor 2009).

Nevertheless, we can probably all identify people we believe are more experienced than we are in the pursuit of a good life and it is possible to identify practices such as reading "good narratives" (Treanor 2009) and engaging in place education (Cameron 2003) which can aid in the development of practical wisdom. Place education, for example, advocates that participants open themselves to deep experiences and reflect on those experiences under the facilitation of a skilled leader before engaging *with* those experiences critically (Cameron 2003). It should come as no surprise that story plays a key role in this process.

The preposition "with" is crucial to the practice of a narrative, everyday ethics (Frank 2004) whether in relation to place, to others or to academic practice. To think *with* someone, some place, some story, is to open up an intersubjective space and enter into dialogue with that person, place or story. To think *about* someone, some place, some story, is to produce a monologue and thus to perpetrate violence (Frank 2004 drawing on Bakhtin 1984).⁴

⁴ The narrative approach to environmental ethics taken here of thinking *with* stories can be contrasted with Liszka's (2003) interest in the evaluating environmental ethical narratives using external criteria from literary studies, which is very much an approach of thinking *about* stories.

The question of how to live a good life is arguably at the heart of the counselling profession, and it is narrative counsellors perhaps more than anyone else who have systematically set out to develop practices for thinking *with* stories (White and Epston 1990). The approach to reading which informed the writing of this paper was inspired by narrative therapist Michael White's (2000) practice of outsider-witnessing. Following White's instructions for outsider-witnesses, as I re-read Alison Watt's story I made sure to pay attention to my affective embodied reactions, to what captured my imagination and to what resonated with my own experiences and stories. I also considered the possibilities for being and acting that were opened up through my engagement with her text.⁵ I then made room for these insights in the re-storying of my own experiences. This process of engaged reading informed the re-tellings of Alison's and my stories that are presented in the remainder of this paper. That is to say, my self-story and embodied experiences have shaped my reading of Alison's story and reading her story has changed the way I understand my own life and give meaning to my experiences. However, these tellings have also been shaped by their presentation to a third audience: the readers of this journal. In what follows, I re-tell my story and Alison's in ways that I hope will thicken understandings of both, in an effort to open up new possibilities for being and acting as academics concerned with ethics in relation to the more-than-human world.

3.1 Beginning My Story as a Human Geographer

⁵ Though developed independently, the process of thinking with stories that I used was similar to that used by narrative counselor Jane Polkinghorne (2001) in the book club she facilitated. A full discussion of my practice of dialogical reading can be found in Willis (2007).

Before bringing Alison Watt's story back into the conversation, let me first introduce mine. My decision to return to university and undertake a PhD in human geography was a temporary solution to the question: What ought I to do in the context of my concerns about climate change and my desire to contribute towards efforts to mitigate it? I used the term "concerns" at the time to make myself intelligible to an academic community that I, as a junior researcher, perceived to be hostile to the expression of emotions.⁶ However, my emotions at the time were much more intense than such a term conveys.⁷ I was motivated to pursue a dissertation related to climate change because I was anxious about the future and about the alterations I already perceived in local ecologies. I was frustrated by the lack of action being taken and grief-stricken at the predicted loss of life. The scale of the problem and the potential for destruction engendered feelings that at times threatened to overwhelm me (Hollander 2008).

In my sense of helplessness, I latched onto heroic narratives of control. Such narratives propose that the findings of social science research can and should be used to inform policy-makers so that they can gain some, albeit limited, mastery over the social world and thereby effect a better future. At that time (the early 2000s), it seemed to me that the only political level at which any positive change was occurring in Canada, with

⁶ While an interest in emotions within geography has a history of over three decades (Bondi 2005b), arguably it is only recently that this interest has coalesced into what might be called an emotional turn (see Davidson, Smith and Bondi 2007). At the time about which I am writing, I remained oblivious to work going on in the discipline on this subject.

⁷ Writing about emotions is a difficult undertaking. I am aware of the limitations of attempts to language those affective embodied experiences that I had (Bondi 2005). However, my interest in this paper is on meaning-making, on narrative, and so to that end I do my best to represent what I was feeling, bearing in mind that all representation is limited and contingent.

regards to climate change, was at the level of municipalities.⁸ I planned to use my dissertation to explore what was happening at that level to enable progress. I believed that my research findings would be helpful to NGOs and government officials who wished to facilitate and even legislate transformations towards more sustainable ways of organizing society. My choice of dissertation topic, therefore, tied my personal story to a heroic narrative about social science and allowed me to construct a story to live by of myself as an academic who was not helpless in the face of climate change.

I worked efficiently through my first year. Every paper topic chosen was designed to contribute towards the dissertation and by the end of my second semester I'd fleshed out my methodology. I would undertake three case studies with municipalities of varying sizes. I would analyse documents produced by environmental organizations and governmental agencies and conduct interviews with key informants. That summer, I arranged and completed my first interviews.

On the surface, my professional life was going well. As long as I was actively *doing* research, I could story myself as having some control over what was happening and I could believe that my work was meaningful. The dominant stance taken in relation to research continues to be that it is not an emotional undertaking (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). This stance enabled me to avoid thinking about the difficult emotions that were motivating my work and being evoked by it (Bondi 2005). I was able to maintain a cheerful, confident disposition in my relationships with faculty, because that was how I was expected to perform (Wilkins 1993). And yet, some unacknowledged part of my self

⁸ This assessment was supported by research on other municipalities in other parts of the world (Darier and Schule 1999, DeAngelo and Harvey 1998, Harvey 1993, Kates and Torrie 1998, Wilbanks and Kates 1999).

began to resist the story I'd chosen to live by. I could not commit to comprehensive exam topics. I was experiencing a sensation of disconnection from my PhD work, but couldn't quite figure out why.

I chastised myself regularly: climate change required action now, but somehow I'd fallen into a quagmire of procrastination. It was only through my relationships with my friends and family that I was able to think through what was going on and to give meaning to my experiences. I came to acknowledge that the further I progressed in my dissertation work, the more anxious and depressed I was becoming.

A few of the interviews had to be postponed because of scheduling conflicts. My interview with Tooker Gomberg, an activist then based in Toronto but whose work had spanned a number of municipalities and provinces and who had influenced the national stage, was one of the ones that got postponed. I was just beginning to acknowledge the emotional toll that my dissertation was taking on me, just starting to wonder if I could go through with it, when I heard that Tooker Gomberg had committed suicide.

I knew of Tooker Gomberg, but I had never met him personally. Certainly the news of his death was shocking in the way that any sudden human tragedy is. However, as mentioned above, I was already unhappy, already questioning my choice of topic, already exploring alternatives when he died. In the logical-scientific realm of cause and effect, his suicide did not lead me to abandon one research topic in favour of another. However, by enrolling it in the stories I tell and re-tell about my PhD experience, his death has become a turning point in my understanding of the meaning of academic practice, just as Anne Vallee's death became a turning point in the narrative logic of Alison Watt's story.

4.1 Picking up Alison's Story of Exploring What it Means to be a Field Biologist

Alison Watt had one year left of her undergraduate degree when she arrived on Triangle Island in 1980. Just as I was using my PhD to explore academia as a potential career path, Alison was motivated to take the position of assistant field biologist to "find out if [she] was cut out for field work" (38). Through our respective apprenticeships, we were both searching for meaningful ways to live in the face of the destruction of parts of the more-than-human world that we valued and cared about.

Soon after arriving, Alison wrote: "I recalled a vision of myself on a cliff bathed in golden light, my hair blowing fetchingly in the wind, like a biologist in a National Geographic Special" (19). However, this picture was quickly shattered. Alison found her work, the island, and her relationship with Anne Vallée, the field biologist, to be almost overwhelmingly difficult. Her experiences challenged the stories she arrived with, and through these challenges to her self-story, she eventually began to question the stories she had subscribed to about the role of science in society.

For four months, the only person Alison had more than fleeting interactions with was Anne. Alison tried to engage her in a dialogue about life beyond the boundaries of the island and their work, but Anne would not participate. Anne's prestigious scholarship and her contract with the Canadian Wildlife Service paid for everything including Alison's salary. These contracts, financial arrangements and research contexts storied Anne as the field biologist and Alison as her assistant. Cut off from other dialogical partners, Alison's self was almost completely dominated by this role she performed. Of

this experience, she wrote: —Our work and isolation narrowed life into practical, repetitive routines. Lately I felt as though parts of me were disappearing.‖ (103).

When people become dominated by stories that limit their options for being and acting in the world in such a way that they are prevented from living preferred storylines, they may enter into a narrative crisis (White and Epston 1990). When Einagel (2002) writes that "subjectivities are mutually (re)constructed in *ethnographic* research relationships, and that, at moments, the task of (re)making selves must take priority over other aspects of research" (emphasis added, 223), the moments she alludes to can be understood as narrative crises. What my and Alison's stories show is that subjectivities, narrative-selves, are co-constructed in other types of research and that moments of crisis can occur in these relationships as well.

Alison's care for birds was important to her sense of self and had been one of the main reasons she had applied to work on Triangle Island. However, her non-specific care for marine birds as an abstract group (Swart 2005) came into conflict with her experience of the lack of specific care in the daily interactions she had with individual birds as a researcher.⁹

Anne had a contract to collect food samples from parent birds of the *Cassin's auklet* species. To do this, the two women set up a mist net at the nesting colony. Shortly after the net was erected, a bird flew into a supporting pole and died (81). Alison's immediate —feeling‖ was that this death was wrong, but she —reasoned‖ that the death was an unfortunate side-effect of a necessary endeavour. She placed the bird's

⁹ Alison's experience provides an interesting contrast to Michel's (1998) study of volunteers at a raptor care centre whose experiences of engaging in specific care for individual birds facilitated in them the development a politicized, non-specific care for birds and ecosystems in general.

death in the context of the extravagant damage being wrought on its species by human activities, and gave meaning to it through the narrative that scientific research will help efforts to save threatened species. Just as I had turned to a heroic narrative of social science in an attempt to cope with the difficult emotions I was experiencing, Alison drew on ecocentric ethical principles (Jones 2000) and heroic stories of science to narratively console herself over the death of that individual:

–I crouched and turned off my headlight, feeling as if I had stolen this small life. I waited in the dark for the next bird, trying to reason with myself---a few losses in the pursuit of knowledge were part of research...The birds were drowning in miles of fishing nets and becoming fouled from oil drilling and tanker traffic; fisheries were destroying their food sources. ...We would need all the knowledge we could gather to conserve them|| (82).

Despite placing her self within the context of a heroic story of science as saviour, this embodied, affective experience marked the beginning of Alison's discomfort with the research practices she was required to engage in. As a field biologist, her interactions with the birds could not be characterized as acts of care.

Alison used the precious hours when she was not performing as a field biologist to hold onto her sense of her self as someone who cares both about birds in general and for specific individual birds. One day, wandering on the island, she came across a pair of eagles guarding an empty nest, their eaglet lying dead on the beach. In her journal, she

wondered if there is an avian form of grief, in explicit contradiction to what she understood to be accepted logical-scientific ways of knowing at that time.¹⁰

Once the puffins arrived to nest, Alison had to spend almost all of her waking hours performing as assistant field biologist. Unable to physically withdraw from that dominant narrative, she withdrew mentally, disconnecting from her research just as I had done. She writes,

–Alone on the colony I sat in the blind, forcing myself to watch each burrow diligently for puffins arriving with food and make pencil entries in my notebook. ...But my mind wandered. ...Each day I spent more and more time thinking about less and less|| (133).

This withdrawal eventually had fatal consequences.

Anne wanted to know what the puffin chicks were being fed by their parents. This was difficult to ascertain because parents return during the dark and deposit food in underground burrows. So, Anne devised a muzzle that could be fitted over nestlings' beaks, preventing them from eating. The researchers could then grab the food in each burrow, weigh it and identify it before removing the muzzle and allowing the nestling to eat. She and Alison took shifts doing this.

Unfortunately, one night Alison forgot to check one of the burrows. Anne confronted her, saying: "A chick was dead...When I went to burrow 16 this morning, the chick still had its muzzle on. ...You forgot to take it off" (136). Alison immediately imagined the death of the chick and the impotence of its parents:

¹⁰ Twenty-nine years after Alison made this journal entry, Bekoff (2009) asserted that there is now general agreement amongst the contemporary scientific community that animals do have emotions, though these are undoubtedly experienced differently from human emotions.

"I thought of the parents faithfully dropping fish at the feet of the chick, starving, unable to eat. The painful death I had inflicted on the innocent bird sickened me. I imagined the parents returning to the empty nest for the next few days, before finally abandoning it and returning to the sea." (136)

Thematically, Alison's reflections on the chick's death and its impact on the parent birds linked the event to the eagles on the beach and her extra-scientific wonderings about avian emotions and care. In contrast, Alison imagined that Anne's thoughts were only about the loss of data. Just as Anne finalized Alison's self as nothing more than field assistant, Alison reduced Anne to nothing more than field biologist.

The negotiation over the co-construction of their selves continued as the conversation continued,

Look, Anne, I really am sorry.' As I spoke to her back, her shoulders stiffened.

She turned, reproachfully. Sometimes I think the research isn't important to you. You don't try to be careful.'

She was right; I was always daydreaming, and in a hurry to finish my work.

Resentfulness rose above self-reproach. -I do care about the birds. But I'm not like you.' (136-137, emphasis in original)

Anne's accusation was that the research was not important to Alison. In her own mind, Alison conceded that this was true; however, in dialogue with Anne she defended her self by asserting that she cared about the birds. Caring about birds was what first led her to

want to try fieldwork, so articulating these as two separate orientations marked a significant change in how she storied her self.

At the beginning of that first summer, Alison was eager to try on "field biologist" as a story to live by. However, as the summer progressed, she became less and less enamored with it, just as she came to conflate that story more and more with Anne. The back of the book jacket for The Last Island is illustrated with a watercolour that Alison painted of Anne sitting on a sunlit hillside, her golden curls blowing in the wind, an image that clearly echoes Alison's earlier romantic story of National Geographic field researchers. By stating in the dialogue quoted above that she is not like Anne, Alison was also rejecting this particular story of field biologist as a one she wanted to live by. In the second part of the book, readers are left with the question as to whether this story is livable at all and Alison moves from personal narrative crisis to challenging the heroic narratives of science she had subscribed to.

5.1 From Narrative Crisis to Challenging Dominant Discourses: Alison

Alison was not with Anne the summer she died.¹¹ She writes that Anne and another assistant were on the hill measuring puffin burrows in —their usual silent companionship‖ (164), out of sight of each other. After a while, the assistant returned to where she had last seen Anne. She called her name, but received no reply. Eventually she found Anne's body. She had fallen only twenty-five feet but had landed, unconscious, face down in a tide pool where she drowned. In narrative reasoning,

¹¹ Anne Vallee died two years after the summer Alison served as her assistant. Alison was working on another, less remote island at the time. One of the wardens there told her that someone had died on the Triangle Island. She wrote that she knew it was Anne before he said her name.

causation comes through emplotment, which depends upon the order in which events are strung together as well as upon theme (Somers 1994, Bruner 1990). Thematically, in Alison's story Anne was killed as much by a lack of connection and dialogue as by losing her footing. In Alison's narrative understanding, Anne was killed by her performance of self-sufficient, reticent, confident, isolated field biologist and by the barriers to connection and care presented by fieldwork practices.

Upon her return to Triangle Island in 1996, Alison discovered that field practices were even more invasive than before. Her embodied experience of feeling a chick panic while she held it still so that her colleague could take a blood sample, filled her with queasiness. The chick, like the majority of its neighbours, was undernourished, the population of puffins at a near record low. Research had been ongoing in the intervening years, but the future of the birds appeared to be more tenuous than ever. Science had failed to deliver on what Alison had interpreted to be its narrative promise and in her experience its practices were even less in keeping with an orientation of care than before.

The night after taking blood samples, Alison dreamt that she came upon a group of people on a dock surrounding a man who was holding a child's face under water. She cried out for him to stop, but the crowd of people insisted that the man was saving the child. In her dream, Alison perceives that this is not true and she takes action:

-I can see that she cannot breathe. I struggle out of the boat, run and grab her from him, her small body heaving and vomiting water|| (164).

In its position in the narrative, this dream follows Alison's revulsion at the practices of science and her observations about the plight of the puffins. Thematically, the drowning

links it to Anne's death. In her dream, Alison stories her self as challenging the dominant narrative, a narrative that her embodied, emotional experiences contradict.

6.1 From Narrative Crisis to Story to Live By: Me

Returning to my story, the people I interviewed were anxious about the future and the short timeframe in which to accomplish necessary changes in behaviour and social organization. They expressed frustration in trying to facilitate these changes and a sense of futility at the monumental tasks they, and their under-funded organizations, were trying to accomplish. These were feelings I shared, feelings that had provided the context in which I chose my dissertation topic and which were propelling me to work as quickly as possible.¹² However, rather than helping me to deal with the emotions of anxiety, helplessness, frustration and grief, I was finding that my research interactions were exacerbating them, even as the dominant narratives of social science that I had subscribed to were denying myself as emotional (Bondi 2005). Denied a place in my academic life, these emotions expressed themselves in my personal life.

As I have now come to understand, emotions are essential to the thinking processes of social researchers (Dickson-Swift et al 2009, Bondi 2007). Whether we acknowledged it or not, we make use of the emotional information being relayed by research participants in order to make sense of data (Bondi 2003). Our own embodied, emotional selves are the instruments through which we track and process emotional information, which means that sometimes the emotions of the people we interview can

¹² In my experience climate change research is a sensitive topic because it can impact negatively on the emotions of the researcher and research participants (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009).

lodge inside our selves (Bondi 2009) or amplify our own feelings. Processing these traces can be difficult, particularly when a person's training and institutional context have not prepared him or her to do so and provide limited openings in which to discuss these aspects of his or her research life (Bondi 2007). This can be exacerbated for novice researchers, who often worry that revealing their emotional reactions to research will damage their careers (Jackson, Backett-Milburn and Newall (forthcoming)).

When confronted with the emotional toll my research was taking, my first response was to compare my *self* to the dominant narratives I had subscribed to and to find my *self* wanting. Just as Alison rejected her representation of a field biologist as a story that *she* could live by, I decided that *I* was not emotionally strong enough to do work on climate change. My perception of the risks posed by working in this area without the emotional resources to do so was reinforced by Tooker Gomberg's suicide.

Deciding to abandon my research into municipal climate change politics did not mean turning to denial (Hollander 2009) any more than Alison saying that she was not like Anne meant she no longer cared about seabirds. Both she and I were rejecting our initial, provisional stories to live by, not the ethical questions central to our lives. In my retelling of Alison's story above, it is through sticking with her moral question while searching for new stories to live by that she begins to challenge the discourses that dominate fieldwork biology. As I discuss below, through holding onto my question as I went through my own narrative crisis, I too began to challenge those discourses and narratives that dominate my field.

In many ways my situation was easier than Alison's was. When I found myself in narrative crisis, I was not physically isolated. I had many people with whom to co-

construct my narrative-self. I worked within a diverse discipline in which a variety of academic responses to the modernist project were being explored and students were encouraged to work reflexively, examining their relationship to their research at all stages of the process (see for example Dowling 2000). I had access to a range of alternative resources with which to story myself as a human geographer and my supervisor was open to exploring new ways of being a human geographer with me.¹³

However, despite the diversity of approaches to human geography, including many that openly challenge the modernist project, the field is still arguably dominated by technical rationality and by concomitant stories of social science as saviour. There is a strong preference for dissertations to have conclusions and for those conclusions to be of the type that can inform policy. This preference is reinforced through the mandates of and decisions made by funding bodies. Other roles certainly exist, such as contributing to emancipatory political projects and taking various critical stances, but in order to be intelligible to the broader community, for the most part such academic stories still make reference to policy, even if it is simply to challenge its dominance. The dominant narrative that social science can and ought to inform policy is beholden to technical rationality; at its core is the belief that social behaviour can be mastered and that such mastery is desirable (Dunne 1993).

Technical rationality also dominates attempts to address the issue of climate change. The main strategy has been to accumulate scientific knowledge about greenhouse gases, to develop predictive models and to disseminate the results of these

¹³ In taking a story to live by approach to understanding the development of academics, supervisors must be understood as key collaborators in the co-construction of novice academics' stories to live by.

models to policy makers and, through government agencies and NGOs, to the public. The texts that I was examining in my research echoed this technicist approach, focusing on communicating scientific findings regarding climate change and providing check-lists or "calculators" to enable people to make decisions on a rational, accounting-type basis.¹⁴ Emotions of distress, anxiety, fear, sadness, depression, numbness, helplessness, hopelessness, frustration and anger are normal responses to the sorts of destruction that are being predicted by climate models, and that are being communicated to the public (Fritze et al. 2008). However, none of the materials I looked at sought to explicitly deal with emotional aspects of the issue. Nor were emotions addressed in scholarship on climate change at that time. The part of me that was being denied an acknowledged place in my research was my emotional life. It was this denial that ultimately sent me into narrative crisis.

I had been drawn to heroic narratives of social science because they offered a promise of control in contrast to my feelings of helplessness. However, the further I progressed in my research, the more acute my feelings of helplessness became.¹⁵ Similarly to the situation with puffins, scientific research into climate change had been ongoing for decades and academic output on the subject had been ramping up considerably. Yet greenhouse gas emissions were steadily increasing, government investment in Canada into solving the problem was minimal and few members of the

¹⁴ This trend is still dominant today. Even Carbon Conversations, the only program I know of aimed at helping individuals transition to lower-carbon lifestyles that has been developed by a counselor, still emphasizes the communication of logico-scientific knowledge in technicist fashion, even as it does at least acknowledge the relational and emotional context in which people make decisions (Randall 2010).

¹⁵ An increase in feelings of helplessness as research on emotionally difficult topics progresses is also reported by Jackson, Backett-Milburn and Newall (forthcoming).

public had made changes to their lifestyles. Moreover, it seemed that the majority of people steeped in the scientific findings of climate change, researchers and government officials, were making only minimal changes to their own lifestyles. Climate research itself was a growth industry in terms of greenhouse gas emissions with scientists flying all over the world to do research, to hold conferences and to share their findings with policy makers. I began to wonder if rational research into the subject had not changed climate scientists' behaviour, nor the organization of their professional associations and disciplines to any noticeable extent, whether it was reasonable to expect their findings would make a difference to policy makers or the public.

Over thirty years ago, Annette Buttner made a similar observation, writing: "If we could be relatively certain about the reasonableness of rationality, if we could still have faith in the gods of the Enlightenment, we could then perhaps conscientiously set about convincing people's intellects of what needs to be done, and rest fairly confident that a moral commitment to doing so would follow. But today we find ourselves morally incapable (or unwilling) to live the kinds of lives which our highly trained minds realize are necessary" (1974, 34-35).

If, as Buttner believed, moral commitment does not necessarily follow the rational, intellectual presentation of "facts", what does it follow? I decided that seeking an answer to that question might just constitute a story I could live by.

Frank (2002), who works in the field of narrative ethics, proposes that a legitimate vocation for social scientists is the excavation and amplification of the moral impulses in people's stories. Frank (2004) puts such a vocation into action by examining the everyday ethics of healthcare through the memoirs of patients, doctors and nurses. The

excavation of moral impulses seemed like a vocation that would fit with my preferred storyline. Following his example, for my dissertation I decided to identify memoirs written by people who were trying to give meaning to their experiences through coming to temporary answers to the question: How ought I to live in this place in relation to the more-than-human world? Bringing this present story full circle, the first of these memoirs that I read was Alison Watt's The Last Island.

As I read memoirs like Alison's and engaged dialogically with the literatures of narrative ethics and narrative counselling many new possibilities opened up for me both in my academic and personal lives in terms of how I might be and act in the more-than-human world. In seeking to develop a story that I could to live by, one that accommodated my experiences, emotions and interests, that allowed me to speak in my own voice, and that enabled me to make connections between what I studied and my own lived life (Bochner 2001), I came to challenge dominant narratives about how human geography ought to be practiced that I had absorbed in my earlier studies.

7.1 Narrative Crisis, Practical Wisdom and Academic Praxis

Attempts to mitigate and adapt to climate change will require the application of technical rationality, of that there can be no doubt. However, technical rationality alone will not solve a problem that is rooted deep within society and the human condition. Arguably, we already have enough technical information to know what needs to be done. What seems to be lacking is practical knowledge about how we might lead good lives in the face of this challenge and the practical wisdom to make the moral commitment to do so. One way to understand what is lacking is through the concept of *phronesis*. The

social sciences are already well versed in using and teaching technical rationality. The challenge before us now, is to learn how to use our academic praxis to develop our own capacities for practical wisdom and to support the development of practical wisdom in our students.

The development of practical wisdom can be supported and facilitated but it can never be managed, controlled or manipulated. Rather than look for experts sanctioned by society to train me or use some externally imposed set of criteria to determine which books I ought to read (Treanor 2009) I have followed Frank's (2002) more democratic approach by seeking out moral impulses in the stories of those who have already struggled to create livable answers to the same questions that concern me. Rather than define a set of rules for the development of *phronesis*, in this paper I have offered the practices of narrative counselling as one set of resources for an academic praxis concerned with its excavation, amplification and cultivation.

From a narrative counselling perspective, climate change can be construed as arising from and exacerbating a collective narrative crisis in Western societies. The stories that currently dominate, stories reducing people to consumers, stories claiming that the accumulation of wealth by a few leads to an enrichment of all, stories asserting that science and technology always benefit society, stories that technical rationality on its own will lead to continuous positive progress in the human situation, these stories limit who we are and what we can do. And these stories are failing to bring about the futures they have promised. It is time for us to tell other stories.

8.1 Expressing Our Selves: A Reprieve

Because the narrative-self is fundamentally embedded in relationships and in society, the final step in narrative counselling is for the person to tell her preferred self-story in a public forum (White and Epston 2001). This "definitional ceremony" provides the opportunity for the thickening of the person's new self-story. In the intersubjective space of this forum, dominant narratives may be challenged and even changed not just for the person who has gone through counselling but for all those gathered to hear her tell her story.

Near the end of her book Alison asks "How to defend puffins?" (172). She begins with technical responses: "Perhaps I would suggest that they can be indicators of the health of fish stocks. I might mention the unexpected ecological effects of removing sea otters from this coast". But she recognizes that these assertions do not convey her deeper moral impulses and concludes: "Could I express my deeper conviction—that the smallest, most insignificant creatures have intrinsic worth; that imagination is impoverished in a world where the value of living things is only calculated in dollars?" (172). Alison has come to this conclusion through narratively reflecting on her practical embodied, emotional and even imaginative experiences in the places she has dwelled in, including Triangle Island, and the interactions she has had with humans and other organisms, most notably seabirds. Her process has been a phronetic one of dialogue with herself, with other inhabitants of the more-than-human world, and with her prospective audience about what she ought to do. In publishing her journal-style memoir, Alison answers her question in the affirmative; she can express her deeper conviction and she can do so in such a way that those who read through the pages of her book can clearly hear her moral

impulse and be called upon themselves to take a deeper look at their own lives and stories.

In this article, through my dialogue with Alison's story I have expressed my conviction that life in its full embodied, emotional, intellectual diversity is worth saving and that academic praxis is impoverished when reduced to the pursuit of technical rationality. In the hopes of continuing the dialogue I have begun here between my own and Alison Watt's stories, I leave you the reader with this question: Can we as academics and researchers and as fundamentally embodied and affective beings, relinquish heroic narratives of technical-rational control and express our deeper convictions of care and connection, opening ourselves up to new possibilities of being and acting in the more-than-human world?

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